

Title of Grant: Student Newspaper Mentoring Project

F2008 – 195P-FF

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Abstract:

The proposed project allocated dedicated resources of time and funds set aside in fall 2008 for the faculty mentor/advisor to the College's student-run newspaper to actively mentor students who are interested in newspaper writing, photography, layout design, and web-publishing. Unlike the sometimes more passive role that advisors take in Frisbee or chess clubs, the advisor to the student-run newspaper has a special obligation weekly to guide students on the newspaper staff toward an understanding of their responsibilities to each other, the college and its stakeholders, and the wider community, as well as a commitment to the Associated Collegiate Press Code of Ethics.

Actual Outcomes:

The advisor mentored students who worked on the newspaper. The VCCS also supported the advisor's travel to an October 2008 national media conference in Kansas City, Kansas, where the advisor was able to network with advisors from other student newspapers across the country.

The reassigned time created an optimal environment in which the advisor and students could be highly productive and increasingly devoted to the production of the student-run newspaper in a number of ways which shall be described in the next section.

The advisor encouraged students on the newspaper to co-author articles with peers, and to collaborate as journalistic teams in which photographers and writers assigned to the same news event were able to communicate effectively and coordinate with each other. Additionally, the advisor facilitated relationships in which student newspaper staff members had the opportunity to team up with faculty from the College's Visual Arts Department, and participate in publication layout workshops, training sessions in digital editing, and photography clinics.

With a membership in the Associated Collegiate Press (Association), key members of the College's newspaper staff were eligible to travel with the faculty advisor a national media conference in March 2009. The advisor recruited 4 students to travel with him to attend that conference. Funding for student travel was arranged from local student activity fees.

The experiential learning opportunities for students have been greatly enhanced because the faculty advisor to the newspaper has time resources to maximize mentoring occasions among eager students. It is the ongoing expectation that students who engage in the mentor-protégée association will depart the college with a greater array of marketable skills and experiences. The advisor who presently has formal reassigned time allotted can continue to help students create a lively media laboratory in which mistakes can and will be made in a given issue of the newspaper, analyzed, fixed, then avoided in

subsequent issues. Every issue of the newspaper is another teaching opportunity and potentially another line on students' résumés.

The second profound benefit that has come with greater advisor/mentor involvement is the stabilization of a resource that is exceptionally valuable to the entire college community as a source of dialog—bi-directional conversation—among all constituents. The newspaper is taking an inspiring position within the academic and cultural communities of the College.

Other Colleges: n/a

Discussion and Critique:

At some point in the future, and pending the level of support from the VCCS and the College, the student newspaper's collaboration with students in the Business Administration Program may make good sense, as participants consider the ways in which the dissemination of news and information interface with for- and non-profit business models.

While many national newspapers are folding or moving away from print media, the student-run newspapers on college- and university campus are thriving. Still, the faculty advisor to the student newspaper has designs to develop a component of the newspaper into an online format that could be updated daily.

As the College's student newspaper staff become more seasoned as writers and reporters, it is possible that select articles from recent issues could be posted to collegiate news wire services for distribution across the nation. In that manner, the college's reputation can be more widely acknowledged as an institution that values and supports student initiatives and excellence in student writing.

Building on the successes of fall 2008 and continuing through spring 2009, as this college's newspaper continues to grow in quality and consistency—from writing to photo-journalism to layout—the newspaper (and its hard-working student staff) can vie for national recognition and awards through organizations such as the Associated Collegiate Press Association.

Sometimes a seemingly subtle re-distribution of resources can have a ripple effect within an organization, and surprisingly beyond.

Evaluation:

The published newspaper issues (7 per semester) are the tangible evidence that there are positive results from the VCCS grant for fall 2008.

At the college, we began with humble base-level numbers at the end of spring 2008. We had a core group of 5 writers who were committed to the newspaper. Our circulation was 200 copies per issue, which is a tabloid publication of 12 to 16 pages. Our dialogue with the public was somewhat sporadic. The newspaper subscribed to a small handful of wire services, and a couple College departments, including the Art Department, expressed an interest in becoming involved.

While these data suggested a movement forward in small increments, the newspaper mentor is now pleased to report that, as a direct result of VCCS support, in fall 2008 the number of writers for the student newspaper increased to 20, and in spring 2009 there are 23 staff members. This increase in staff has allowed students to work in two teams, thereby developing two issues of the newspaper simultaneously, with one issue leading the other by one week.

- The circulation of the newspaper has increased by 1/3-1/2.
- The student writers have all selected “beats,” which are regular sources of information throughout the College community.
- The number of stories that are co-authored has doubled.
- The number of articles written locally per issue has risen by 1/3, and newswire articles (written by students outside of the College) have fallen by 1/3. That detail is very important because it signals that more and better work is taking place on campus.
- The newspaper has acquired commercial-quality distribution boxes that bolster the aura of a student-produced periodical.

In general, the college community is becoming aware of the newspaper’s potential as a means of bring people together. For the first time, the community expects and anticipates each issue of the newspaper.

The students who attended the national media conference have delivered their findings to the rest of the student newspaper staff.

All of these successes are in large measure due to the support provided by the VCCS.

Dissemination:

The harvest of this VCCS-supported project is readily apparent around the College. People are reading the student newspaper; only a few days after each issue is distributed to the boxes, those newspaper boxes are empty. The newspaper is a known entity on campus.

Students have become interested in taking an intro to journalism course on campus.

The faculty advisor/mentor and the student editor-in-chief have recently (February 2009) delivered a presentation at a national media convention.

The administration at the college is vigorously supporting the efforts of the students on the newspaper.

The faculty advisor to the student newspaper sincerely thanks the VCCS for its generous support during fall 2008. The advisor expresses gratitude to his college for its continued support. In particular, the Dean of Humanities has been a wonderful advocate for the mentorship project, and the Vice President for Academic Affairs has been most encouraging, as has the college’s President.